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The Mineral Industry of New Caledonia

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The Territory of New Caledonia and Dependencies is located in Oceania in the South Pacific Ocean east of Australia and close to Vanuatu, which lies to the northeast. Although both Britain and France originally settled New Caledonia during the first half of the 19th century, the islands became a French possession in 1853 during the reign of Napoleon III. New Caledonia consists of La Grand Terre, which is the territory's main island and one of the largest islands in the Pacific Ocean; the archipelago of Loyaute; and numerous small, sparsely populated islands and atolls. The capital of the territory is Noumea, which is located on La Grand Terre. The territory has only three administrative divisions (provinces), which are Iles Loyaute, Nord, and Sud (Loyalty Islands, North, and South, respectively).

New Caledonia's total area is 19,060 square kilometers (km^2), which is slightly smaller than the U.S. state of New Jersey. New Caledonia's land area covers 18,575 km^2, and its water areas, 485 km^2. The territory has 2,254 kilometers of coastline (U. S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2006§[1]). New Caledonia's population in 2005 was estimated to be 216,494. The largest ethnic group was of Melanesian origin, about 42.5%, followed by European, 37.1%, Wallisian, 8.4%, Polynesian, 3.8%, Indonesian, 3.6 %, and Vietnamese, 1.6% (Resource Information Unit, 2006, p. 44).

New Caledonia is rich in mineral resources. The country's mineral resources were chromium, cobalt, copper, gold, iron, manganese, nickel, and silver. However, in the past 5 years, nickel was the only mineral produced in large quantity, mainly by Société le Nickel (SLN) in the form of crude ore, ferronickel, and nickel matte. All nickel products were exported mainly to Australia, France, and Japan.

The mineral industry of New Caledonia continued to be dominated by the mining of nickeliferous laterite-saprolite and garnierite ores and the production of ferronickel of various commercial grades and nickel matte at the 75,000-metric-ton-per-year (t/yr)-capacity Doniambo Smelter near Noumea. The products of the Doniambo plant consisted of about 80% ferronickel and 20% matte. The ferronickel was used primarily in making stainless steel, and the nickel matte was shipped to Eramet S.A.'s Sandouville Refinery near La Havre in northern France for conversion into high-purity nickel metal and salts of nickel and cobalt. The Doniambo Smelter was owned and operated by SLN. SLN was privatized by the French Government in 1999, SLN's shareholders became Eramet, 60%, Nisshin Steel Co. of Japan, 10%, and representatives from the three New Caledonian Provinces through a public company, Société Territoriale Caledonienne de Participation Industrielle, 30% (Resource Information Unit, 2006, p. 134).

New Caledonia was the world's fifth ranked nickel producer following Russia, Australia, Canada, and Indonesia (Kuck, 2007). The French Overseas Territory has about 25% of the world's known nickel resources (Resource Information Unit, 2006, p. 45).

SLN mined nickel ore on the main island (La Grande Terre) from six operations: the Kouaoua, the Koumac, the Nepoui, the Poro, the Thio, and the Tiebaghi Mining Centers. Their output supplied feed to SLN's Doniambo Smelter. Nickel mines at the Boa Kaine, the Ouaco, the Poum, and the Poya Mining Centers were owned and operated by Société Minière du Sud Pacifique (SMSP). SMSP mined nickel ore and exported it to Australia to be used as feed for BHP Billiton Ltd.'s Yabulu refinery in Townsville, Australia, and to Japan (Resource Information Unit, 2006, p. 45).

Outlook

Substantial recent investments in the nickel industry, combined with the recovery of global nickel prices are expected to brighten New Caledonia's economic outlook during the next 5 years. Inco Ltd. of Canada planned to undertake a $2.2 billion Goro Nickel-Cobalt Project near the southeastern tip of New Caledonia. Social and environmental concerns about the project continued to prompt protests by indigenous Kanak groups, however, and could delay or even shelve the project. As a result, the economic outlook may not be as bright as expected beyond 2008.

References Cited

Kuck, P.H., 2007, Nickel: U.S. Geological Survey Mineral Commodity Summaries 2007, p. 112-113.

Resource Information Unit, 2006, Register of Indo-Pacific Mining 2006: Subiaco, Australia, Resource Information Unit, 157 p.

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U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2006, New Caledonia, World Factbook 2006, accessed August 14, 2006, at URL http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/nc.html.

Major Source of Information

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[1]A reference that includes a section mark (§) is found in the Internet Reference Cited section.

TABLE 1
NEW CALEDONIA: PRODUCTION OF MINERAL COMMODITIES[1]

(Metric tons unless otherwise specified)

Commodity[2]		2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Cement		92,868	100,080	100,171	114,762	119,302
Nickel:						
Ore:						
Gross weight	thousand metric tons	7,220	5,944	6,625	7,033 r	6,445
Co content[3]		3,540	2,780	2,602	2,721	2,590 e
Ni content		117,734	99,841	112,013	118,279	111,039
Ferronickel:						
Gross weight		153,012	162,973 r	167,208 r	143,400 e	155,800 e
Ni content		45,912	48,650	50,666	43,016	46,738
Nickel matte:						
Gross weight		17,586	15,583	15,309	17,200	18,100
Ni content		13,061	11,217	10,857	12,164	12,838

eEstimated; estimated data are rounded to no more than three significant digits. rRevised.

[1]Table includes data available through October 2006.

[2]In addition to the commodities listed, crude (unspecified) and crushed stone, construction sand, and silica sand for metallurgical use are produced, but available information is inadequate to make reliable estimates of output.

[3]Includes only cobalt contained in mined limonite.

Source: Institut de la Statistique et des Études Économique, New Caledonia and U.S. Geological Survey, Minerals Questionnaire, 2001-05.
British Geological Survey, World Mineral Production 2000-04.